

Valentina Kozlova: "I NEED TO BE HAPPY"

I entered the ballet hall and froze in astonishment: beautiful young dancers flying in an endless string, following a huge circle. In the center of this whirlwind stood a smiling, slender beauty, controlling this vortex with light movements of her flexible arms. It was the legendary VALENTINA KOZLOVA, ballerina, choreographer, teacher, producer. For half a century, she tirelessly continues to amaze the cultural worlds with her art and her ideas.

These days, Valentina Kozlova is rehearsing with Cleveland Ballet ahead of the premiere of Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake.



I met her in the office of Dr. Michael Krasnyansky, President of Cleveland Ballet, during a break between rehearsals.



Looking through published materials, I found many comments in the press where they are calling you the most beautiful woman in America. I would like to understand - is it the quality of American air or your physiology that help you maintain your amazing condition? You are unusually resilient and beautiful, time seems to have no effect on you, and probably never will. Time certainly takes its toll, but seriously, everything depends on the state of mind. I do not want to stop; I always go from one project to the next. After Cleveland, I return to New York, then fly to Brazil. I don't just get bored when there's nothing to do. I see no reason to live idly. In their days, my teachers, above all, Grigorovich (Yuri Grigorovich, legendary choreographer and producer, the *maitre de ballet* of the Bolshoi Theatre of Russia - ed.), helped me understand this very well.

You once danced Odette and Odile under Grigorovich.

I danced in all of his performances at the Bolshoi. And when he invited me to dance the leading part in the first performance at the

opening of the Bolshoi Theatre's season in Lincoln Center, our People's Artists of the Soviet Union, who also danced this part, started ringing all of the phone lines to the Kremlin, complaining that this is wrong, that this young girl (although I was already a leading soloist), may dance in New York in the second or third performance, but not in the first. But Grigorovich put me in the opening performance.

What kind of teacher, not a choreographer, but a teacher was he?

As a choreographer, I think he was amazing. However, working with him was hard, because he did not cut slack for anyone, even his wife Natasha, if she did something wrong (Natalia Bessmertnova, an outstanding ballerina, *People's Artist of the USSR* - ed.). He said he didn't have time to muddle, even with his wife. We all got used to it; we understood that we need to be quick on our feet.

Today, at the ballet rehearsal, I saw you showing exactly the same attitude to work: no slack for anyone, everything is tough, but with a smile at the same time. Everything is precise and without any compromises.

Why would you want to drag it out: you either do it or you don't, it's your time and it's my time. If I am giving you something, I do it in good conscience, I want to help you.

At the same time, you fled Grigorovich to America.

(*Famous Soviet "fugitives" - Rudolf Nureyev, ballet dancer, choreographer, one of the brightest stars of the Leningrad Kirov Opera and Ballet Theatre (now the Mariinsky Theatre). In 1961, during a tour in Paris, he refused to return to the USSR; Mikhail Baryshnikov, ballet dancer. In 1974, during a tour of the ballet companies of two capitals [Moscow and Leningrad, ed.] (the Bolshoi and Kirov theatres) in Canada and the U.S.A., he asked for political asylum in the United States; Alexander Gordunov, ballet dancer. In 1979, during a tour of the Bolshoi Theatre in New York, he applied for political asylum. U.S. President Jimmy Carter and General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU Leonid Brezhnev became involved in the incident; Valentina Kozlova, together with her husband, ballet dancer Leonid Kozlov, remained abroad in 1979*)

I did not flee Grigorovich, I fled this whole system. I met him a few years after emigrating. I was in Rome, and was invited to the TV studio. The building had revolving entrance doors. As I entered these doors, I saw Grigorovich. I was so surprised and yelled out: "Yuri Nikolaevich!", and he "Valechka, Valechka, you're such a



blankety-blank." Then he says: "I have not forgiven anyone, but I forgive you. Visit us." He wanted me to come to Moscow and dance as a guest performer in "Swan." The we talked for a long time on the phone; it was sometime in 1988.

At that time, you were already in New York and working with Balanchine.

(*George Balanchine (Georgiy Balanchivadze) was an outstanding American choreographer of Georgian descent, the founder of American ballet and modern neoclassical ballet art, the author of about 300 ballets - ed.*)

I started working for his New York City Ballet back in 1983.

Your escape story made a lot of noise at the time. Indeed, in those days, artists on tour escaped both individually and in groups. So many incredible stories. They hid in the basements, snatched the passports from their KGB escorts, and lay down on the pavement, calling the police. Was your escape story more or less painful?

Quite the contrary, it really was like a detective movie. We planned the escape with my ex-husband the night before; we were very nervous...We got up in the morning and went to the immigration office. There, we were questioned for five hours, then we were fed croissants and taken through the basement to an FBI car. Then, we saw that the house we came to was completely surrounded by reporters. We were kept at the FBI for three days. By this time, the whole world knew what had happened to us. The Soviet services immediately announced that we had been kidnapped and demanded that we publicly declare that this was our own decision. It was difficult, it was scary. There was a rally. Representatives of both sides gathered: American and Soviet, and reporters from all over the world. The KGB officers fixed their eyes on us. I knew they were trained to literally kill with their eyes. I was trembling but looked into their eyes. I kept telling myself to take it in as a

movie. And that we must endure.

Then there was freedom, tours around the world and, finally, the New York City Ballet.

Yes, Balanchine invited me. At first, I didn't want to go there. But the situation was serious. Yes, we have escaped, but life here was different and complicated, the atmosphere was different from what we were used to at the Bolshoi Theatre. There was a lack of good teachers, of permanent theaters, studios. For two years we traveled as guests anywhere and everywhere. In financial terms, it was amazing. We were paid a lot of money, but as I considered how it all occurred, I thought - what a nightmare! **Did you ever fear that it would suddenly stop and there would be no more new invitations?**

No, because I did not allow myself to make a mistake even for a second, even in class. You can't imagine how many people wanted us to be gone, how they looked at me, at how I move, how my legs rise, how I can do all this. Of course, I had good training, and yet, when I came to the studio to take a class, I did not allow myself to make a single mistake literally from the first second. I remember how in 1989 I came to the Kremlin to dance Balanchine's repertoire. The ballet was very good but also very difficult. Before the very last performance, a Russian critic came to see me, sat in the dressing room where I did my makeup, and said: "Valentine, please explain to me: I went to see all of your performances, today will be the last one. I thought - she did the first performance brilliantly, but she would surely have a fall in the second performance. But you did not fall. How could that be?" I replied: I just cannot afford it. He says: "How so, and your legs?" - Well about the legs, you just have to work and work.



Would you like to tell this story to your current students? They may become even athletic.

They are trying, they are very good.

Overall, how would you rate Cleveland Ballet?

They are at a very good level. I was surprised that Gladisa (*Gladisa Guadalupe, Artistic Director of Cleveland Ballet - ed.*) managed to gather so many good men and women. If it continues like this, the company will show serious progress. Today, it is already a big and good company. Of course, it can be cleaned up a bit, but I can state that I am very satisfied. I liked rehearsing with them yesterday and giving a class today.

But here is the question: the troupe is planning to complete the work on Swan Lake by September 15th. Literally just a week and a half away. How can you do it in such a short amount of time?

In fact, I put on a presentation in three days. When I am invited for 2 weeks, I say: 5-6 days are sufficient for me, I will take care of everything.

In October, I am going to Brazil. Then Paraguay and Mexico, but this is still in question - it seems that this idiotic COVID is starting up again. Then I have eight Nutcrackers, and somewhere in January-February I will probably fly to Eastern Europe, to Belgrade - they want me to produce the semi-finals of my competition there. (*Valentina Kozlova founded her own competition back in 2011. Today, the Valentina Kozlova International Ballet Competition (VKIBC) has grown into a major international competition with overseas semi-finals. Participants have won numerous scholarships to dance schools and summer programs, and won contracts with such companies as Boston Ballet, Houston Ballet, etc. - ed.*)

I choose a variety of countries around the world for hosting the semi-finals. The finals - only in New York City. Although, if we agree and find a decent venue, we will hold a semi-final in Cleveland (soon after our conversation, Valentina Kozlova visited Connor Palace at Playhouse Square and,



according to Michael Krasnyansky, was delighted with the beauty of the hall. "In fact, this is the second Mariinsky," she said and confirmed: the semi-finals of her International Ballet Competition will be held in Cleveland.)

You mentioned eight Nutcrackers, how can they be reconciled? After all, these are different schools, different productions. How do you approach these productions, don't you have to refocus somehow?

I will produce all eight on my own, and I will do everything at my school.

Is your school referred to as a conservatory?

Yes, and I always have many excellent graduates. (*The "Valentina Kozlova's Dance Conservatory of New York" ballet school was opened in 2003 in Manhattan. Her students have received prestigious prizes and positions in companies such as Boston Ballet, American*

Ballet Theatre, Washington Ballet, Stuttgart Ballet, Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo, Universal Ballet, and Cuban National Ballet - ed.)

Then, I bring in the corps de ballet and the soloists. I keep changing things if I see that someone is under-performing. The main thing is not to dwell on things you have done; you must always go forward. You need to understand people, and you need to understand how the public reacts to this or that, you need to see who comes to the theater and you need to understand it's culture...

You instantly process all this and immediately orient yourself - of course, you have vast experience. How did you start your work here, in Cleveland?

Let's start with mentioning that I invited Gladisa and Misha (*Gladisa Guadalupe and Michael Krasnyansky - leaders of Cleveland Ballet - ed.*) to the jury of my competition, and I really liked how they make absolutely right decisions.

At our last conversation with all twenty members of the jury (I invite to the jury specialists from different countries according to specific criteria), after the medals have been distributed, I said: the winners need prizes, scholarships, trips for two or three days to other cities...Everyone stayed silent. Then I continued: "I invited you not only to enjoy the sights of New York, I need your help, and you will not leave just like that." Pause...And prizes and offers started pouring in immediately. Gladisa turned to her husband with an inquiring look. And Misha said, "We need this woman."

I have two more questions, mundane ones. The first one is about your diet, maybe it is the secret of your youthfulness?

My diet? I don't follow any. I have small

problems. I used to eat a lot of butter and cheese. Due to elevated cholesterol, I gave it up. But I eat a lot of bread, I eat a lot of croissants and cheesecake and cookies and anything, but only low-fat. Why am I skinny? Well, I don't even know myself. I can't eat late at night, but I can get up at two in the morning and almost finish a pint of ice cream.

And one more question. You recently had an accident - you broke your toes. But the most important thing is how you happened to break them. On stage, while dancing. I'm sorry, but it is incredible that you continue to dance. Yes, I will take the stage again. And more than once.

What happened?

During a dance, I slipped on a scarf, ended up on the floor, but got up quickly. When I left the stage, I was in a lot of pain, but I continued to walk in high heels. I knew that my foot was injured, but no one thought that to be the case - I continued to walk, smile, laugh. The next day I went to see my surgeon, he took an x-ray and said: "You have fractures in four places, you will never recuperate fully." I said OK, bye! And I keep dancing.

It is pure joy to be in such a shape despite one's age. You embody some amazing stamina, a love of life that constantly shines through your eyes. I love life. During COVID, when everything was closed, I experienced strange sensations, not quite depression. I could not understand why this happened, why it keeps going around in circles, why the scientists can't beat the pandemic in any way. Then the world lost its mind with this war, and I was like a fish out of water. But then I thought: no, it cannot be this way, I need to be happy. Whatever happens, let's move forward!